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ABSTRACT

The strong relationship between knowledge of vocabulary and reading achievement leads to the conclusion that knowing the meaning of words in a passage enables the reader to answer questions about the passage. The goal of vocabulary instruction is the acquisition of the concepts represented by words as well as the ability to recognize and analyze words. To teach vocabulary effectively, the instructor must recognize that the vocabulary of a mature language user consists of three tiers: (1) high frequency, very basic words, (2) extremely low frequency words, and (3) frequently encountered words connoting a mature literacy level. Vocabulary instruction should be concerned with this third tier of words, and strategies should involve relatively easy-to-plan lessons, quickly developed materials, and results that justify the time spent both in and out of class. Typical activities include giving students examples of the word, using the word in meaningful sentence contexts, giving synonyms and antonyms for the word, and using the word in analogies. Techniques such as semantic mapping or webbing provide a means for students to visualize the association among words. An additional concept-extending strategy involves having students look outside of the classroom for words they are studying. In designing a vocabulary curriculum, teachers should keep in mind the importance of promoting interest and independence in vocabulary development. (NKA)

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Vocabulary Development: A Continuing Need

Vocabulary development is a kind of empowerment to use things and ideas.

By Barbara Kapinus

Why Teach Vocabulary?

Vocabulary development is a natural part of a child's growth in language and general cognitive ability. As children learn labels for concrete things and abstract concepts, they begin to manipulate these labels—or words—in their minds. This manipulation is a central activity of thinking. Words are major tools of thought. It follows, then, that teaching vocabulary enhances thinking.

The vocabulary a child possesses is also a major factor in the child's communication skills. Increasing a child's vocabulary gives that child the ability to interact with and communicate with his or her environment more effectively. Vocabulary development, then, can be characterized as a kind of empowerment to use things and ideas.

In any content area, the development of vocabulary is an integral part of learning. Whether the subject is physics or physical education, there are terms whose special meanings for that subject must be mastered. To answer questions and solve problems in a content area, students must have a firm grasp of the relevant vocabulary words and the concepts they represent.

There is a strong relationship between knowledge of vocabulary and reading achievement. Although the nature of the relationship is not clearly defined, research does support the common sense idea that knowledge of the meaning of words in a passage enables the reader to answer questions about the passage.

Vocabulary instruction, therefore, has a place in every content curriculum.

Instructional Concepts

The goal of vocabulary instruction is the acquisition of the concepts represented by words as well as the ability to recognize and analyze words. To achieve this goal, teachers must guide students through different opportunities to master words. It is helpful also if teachers model their own thinking about words and their meanings as part of the instruction. Clearly, success in vocabulary instruction is affected by the

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"...giving something a name
is the vastest generative idea that ever was conceived."
—Suzanne K. Langer

Ownership of words and concepts requires a series of exposures to the words.

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amount of practice with new words and the degree of active processing of words and their meanings. "It takes an extended series of fairly intense exposures before one 'owns' a word, that is, before it can be quickly accessed and applied in appropriate contexts." (Beck et al. 1980)

In practice, vocabulary instruction sometimes consists of little more than assigning students lists of words for later testing or handing out ditto sheets with word exercises. As one-shot approaches, such exercises do little to help students gain the ownership of words that is the true measure of success in developing concepts and learning vocabulary. Such limited exercises, which are often supported by textbooks and other materials, ignore what is known about the value of providing a series of word exposures and mastery activities that lead to ownership.

A lack of direct, effective instruction in vocabulary leads students to believe—incorrectly, of course—that they can gain the power of words by memorizing word definitions. Students often do not acquire efficient strategies for independent study of vocabulary because they are not exposed to such strategies through instruction.

Creating a Program

We know much about ineffective approaches to teaching vocabulary—they are likely to be one-shot efforts that emphasize memorizing definitions. What are some effective approaches and how are they developed?

In planning an effective program of vocabulary development, there are decisions to be made about what vocabulary will be developed and how it will be taught. Teacher involvement is critical to success in this as in all instructional programs.

Beck, McKeown and Omanson (1984) suggest that in deciding which words to teach in a language arts program we begin with the understanding that the vocabulary of a mature language user consists of three tiers. One tier includes high frequency, very basic words such as "see," "cake," "blue," etc. These words do not require direct instruction in their meanings. Another tier contains words of extremely low frequency or very specific application, such as "legato," "nova," and "crustacean." The most efficient way of dealing with these words is probably as they are needed for a specific passage, a lesson, or a content area unit.

The third tier consists of words frequently encountered and employed by those who have achieved a mature level of literacy. This tier might include words such as "consistent," "representative," "novice," and "facility." It is this group of

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Vocabulary has a place in e

Tips on Teachin

Research on vocabulary instr
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- Activities for relating backgro
- Information about both conte
- Opportunities to process wor
levels.
- Several encounters with new
- Activities for elaborating on

"The transformation of experience into concepts . . . is the motive of language."
—Susanne K. Langer

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words that is the center of vocabulary instruction in language arts, as teaching these words effectively not only improves general vocabulary but also reading comprehension.

Teachers also face decisions about what words to teach that relate to a specific piece of writing that the class will be reading. Steve Stahl (1985) suggests three questions as aids in making this decision: Is the word critical for comprehending the text? Is the student likely to encounter the word several times? Is there sufficient context to define the word? If the answer to the first two questions is "yes" and if the answer to the third question is "no," then it would be advisable to teach the word.

Decisions about the selection of instructional strategies revolve around cost/time effectiveness in terms of teacher effort and time in preparation, classroom time allotted, and student time and effort. Clearly, it is not efficient to spend large amounts of time on words seldom encountered in reading and real life. Strategies should involve relatively easy-to-plan lessons, quickly developed materials, and payoffs in learning that justify the time spent both in and out of class.

In planning instruction, it is helpful to target several words that fit into the same semantic category. For example, the category "dwellings" might include "mansion," "hovel," "lair," "condominium," etc. This grouping facilitates the use of activities involving associations among words.

Instructional Strategies

The instructional strategies described below were chosen because they appear to offer students a great deal in terms of conceptual growth in return for reasonable amounts of effort. They are all focused on developing concepts rather than memorizing words and their definitions. They also provide opportunities for classifying, identifying and analyzing relationships, and thinking critically—essential skills for mature language users.

Introducing a new word begins with the definition and moves from there to activities that help students gain ownership of the word. Typically these activities will include giving students examples and non-examples of the word, using the word in meaningful sentence contexts, giving synonyms and antonyms for the word, and using the word in analogies. These activities help students "construct" the concept of the word from its various characteristics.

Teachers can help students organize and clarify a concept through such techniques as a semantic map or web. Such diagrams provide a means for students to visualize the associations among words or concepts. Because it involves thinking about relationships and using a visual format to show conceptual and linguistic information, webbing or mapping is an ex-

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very content area.

A semantic map helps stude

ng Vocabulary

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About the

Barbara Kapinus joined the Maryland State Department of Education in 1985 as a specialist in reading and communications skills in the Language and Learning Improvement Branch, Division of Instruction. Prior to that time she served in specialist roles in reading and instruc-

"To call forth a concept a word is needed."
—Antoine Laurent Lavoisier

nts clarify concept.

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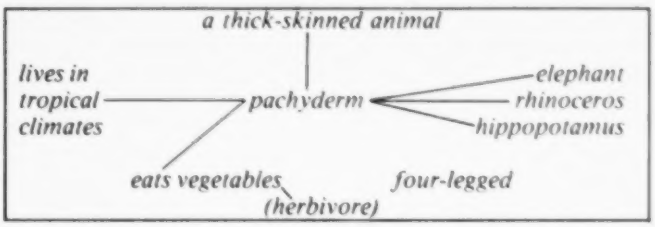
cellent aid to processing and remembering information about vocabulary. Additional information can be added to the map over time, which helps students perceive the dynamic quality of word meanings that grow and change with experiences. An example of one type of map is given below.



Instructional strategies such as analogies, sentence generation, and mapping help students gain an understanding of words. Retaining that understanding over time is a function of another part of vocabulary instruction in which new words are recorded for later reference and use. Two useful approaches are the word wall and concept definition cards. The word wall is simply a space in the classroom where new words are posted on cards or construction paper. Words can be put into categories such as people, things, activities, and descriptors. In content classrooms words might be grouped around topics such as geographical features, economics, chemicals, or biological processes. Students can refer to the word wall to remind themselves of words to use in discussions and writing.

Concept-definition cards provide students with both contextual and definition information about a word. An example is shown below.

dour	
definition	context
gloomy	bad news
unpleasant	look on a person's face
pouting	bad mood

Word wall, concept cards help students retain words.

Promoting Ownership of Words

To extend concept understanding and provide enough encounters with words to give students ownership of words, it is important to follow initial instruction on word meaning with additional activities. Again, these activities should be efficient in terms of required time and effort. They also can provide opportunities to exercise cognitive skills as well as vocabulary knowledge.

Some techniques, such as mapping, are useful as both in-

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e Author

tion with the Prince George's County Public Schools. She has also taught as an adjunct faculty member at Western Maryland College. In addition to vocabulary, her work at MSDE has focused on student self-monitoring skills and the role of the reading specialist.

"A powerful agent is the right word."
—Mark Twain

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Using a word in sentences helps students explore word meanings.

troductory and follow-up strategies. Students can be encouraged to develop their own unique word maps. Having students use a word in two or more sentences or a paragraph encourages them to explore the word's meaning in a variety of contexts. It can also be a means of exploring the multiple meanings of some words.

The word pairs analysis is another excellent means of reviewing previously learned words as well as newer words. Pearson and Johnson (1978) suggest that analyzing word pairs provides an opportunity to identify associations between words. This strategy allows students to exercise some divergent thinking and promotes lively discussion as students explain and justify their decisions. After some practice students can generate their own word pairs. Below is an example of word pairs analysis.

	Same	Opposite	Go Together	No Relation
desert - nomad			X	
nomad - wanderer	X			
nomad - settler		X		
desert - city				X

An additional strategy for extending concepts and promoting ownership of words involves having students look outside of class for words they are studying. Beck and McKeown (1983) suggest keeping a chart of points earned by students for noting their vocabulary words outside of class. Students' reports on words encountered in various contexts can be checked individually while the rest of the class is working as a group. Points earned lead to achieving successive levels, which may be given names such as Word Worker, Word Whirlwind, and Word Wizard. This activity promotes students' awareness of their vocabulary words outside of class as well as further concept development.

Beck and McKeown suggest another strategy for extending students' understanding of words that involves their demonstrative reactions to words. A word is presented and students respond with a "yah" or a "boo". For example, "spectacular" might receive "yah" and "dreary" might receive "boo." Teachers can call for silent cheers and thumbs down or the nosier reactions, depending on the classroom situation and the teacher's tolerance for noise. Some words may elicit mixed responses, providing the opportunity for discussion and justification of responses.

These extension strategies are important in two ways. First, they provide opportunities for students to encounter words frequently, which produces better word knowledge and more fluent access to word meaning. Providing numerous en-

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"Words are all we have."
—Samuel Beckett

Vocabulary instruction seeks to develop mature users of language.

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counters without resorting to dull drills is a challenge for teachers. Extension activities are an effective response to the need to have students use and think about new words several times. In addition, these strategies provide opportunities for students to develop vocabulary as part of total language arts growth. Listening, speaking, reading, writing, and thinking are encouraged and improved as students explore the meanings and uses of words.

Vocabulary growth is a life-long process. The ultimate goal of vocabulary instruction should be to provide the skills and motivation for individuals to be self-directed in that process. In designing vocabulary curriculum, teachers should keep in mind the importance of promoting interest and independence in vocabulary development.

Vocabulary and Thinking

In summary, the goal of vocabulary development is not simply the identification of words met in reading or listening. It is not merely the ability to match definitions with words. The goal of vocabulary development is the ability to access the concepts signaled by words encountered and to have words readily available for communication. In choosing and using words as well as interpreting them, a great many thinking and language processes are involved.

At its best, then, vocabulary instruction also encourages critical and creative thought, writing, and speaking. The design of a vocabulary program involves the complex weaving of language and cognition to foster the development of mature, reflective users of language. This is clearly one of schooling's important goals.

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